

Painting the town

As marketing campaigns become increasingly sophisticated, many companies are looking to go larger to make an impact. **Morwenna Kearns** looks at the changing face of large-format advertising and billboards

Think of a bustling city and you'll probably think of colourful, brightly-lit streets, punctuated by neon illumination, animated screens and huge billboards. Digital signage and LEDs have made a distinct impression on the large-format advertising market, but billboards remain one of the major channels to get a message across to a metropolitan audience. Commuters too are a significant target for this kind of marketing, as a drive on the M1 or a trip on the Underground will prove, but there has also been an expansion out of the bigger cities. While large signage will never be likely to find a place in smaller towns, constant urban sprawl will ensure there will always be more space for marketers to utilise.

This kind of advertising has, of course, been around for decades, but there have been some changes in the sector in recent years, primarily a shift, for many printers, from offset litho and screen to digital printing equipment. There has also been a step away from solvent to more environmentally sensitive UV-curable techniques. More work is being produced on roll-to-roll UV-curable machines, predominantly in 3.5 and 5m widths.

Additionally, the wide-format market has been steadier than many commercial printing sub-sectors throughout the recession. Print and

display firm Pixart.it, for example, says its turnover in wide-format grew by 60 percent in the first quarter of 2010 compared with the same period last year, while 2009 saw an increase of 30 percent in comparison with 2008. "In terms of the market in general, it is universally recognised as a sector for growth because margins are, for now, under much less pressure than in the commercial print sector," comments Matteo Rigamonti, managing director of Pixart.it.

Different locations offer different opportunities for large-format advertising – this long copy would not be suitable for roadside applications, for example

While this popularity may have resulted in more print companies moving into the billboard and large-format advertising arena, sign-makers also considering competing here may be comforted by the fact that, due to the size of the product, the quality does not need to be high; thus old equipment can be used to great effect. In addition, sign-makers are better placed to sell these wares, armed as they are with an existing understanding of display techniques and principles.



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Super-sizing it

There may be growing pressure from digital signage, but Clear Channel – one of the ‘big three’ outdoor advertising companies alongside CBS Outdoor and JC Decaux – claims to offer 60,000 advertising opportunities in the billboard, six-sheet and premium format field in the UK, revealing the extent of the market.

Producing such large work may grab headlines as well as potential customers’ attention. Big news stories of the past year include Extreme Display’s 13 x 10m UPVC banner advertising the film ‘Monsters vs Aliens’ – helped by the installation engineers’ alien outfits – the 350sq m banner heralding a David Beckham-fronted Armani Underwear range at Selfridges in London, and a billboard in New Zealand designed to ‘bleed’ red dye when it rains to draw attention to road safety. With such a large space to use, it is clear that sign-makers can be much more creative than for standard jobs – depending on the versatility of their kit. The Clear Channel Outdoor Student Design Awards has, for the last 22 years, been encouraging design students to get involved with outdoor advertising with the lure of cash prizes and national recognition. This year’s competition, which closes on April 16th, is sponsored by Samsung, Malibu and Lynx and involves producing designs for an Adshel six-sheet poster and a 96-sheet billboard, plus an optional digital six-sheet design – showing the design-led printed advertising market is alive and well.

Digital signage is becoming an increasingly common sight, particularly in transport hubs, but it is often used in conjunction with printed advertising. CBS Outdoor, for instance, has embraced the range of available media to produce a huge amount of material for the London Underground, among other locations. The Tube is an especially effective place to advertise, says the company’s head of voice Martin Porter, as marketers can take advantage of

Projection technology is now being employed at sites where printed advertising used to be king



Outdoor advertising can often catch the attention of commuters, such as this work by Urban Storm on a Uvistar printer



the average three-minute waiting time that passengers spend on platforms – and CBS has examples of clients using long copy which would not be suitable on the roadside. Sales director Peter Charlton comments on the opportunities which are opened by adding digital to the marketing mix.

“Large-format advertising offers huge stature brand advertising and, located in the right place, a great point-of-sale message,” he says. “However, digital screen advertising has opened up a whole new revenue stream for the out-of-home market due to the much shorter production deadlines. The flexible nature of posting by location, day of week or even time of day offers up new ways for advertisers to reach audiences.

“For example, [National Lottery operator] Camelot was a traditional radio and press spender, using those channels for short-term messaging linked to rollovers. With digital screens they can now tap into a high-end audience in much the same way. Even though technology in the print sector

has moved on incredibly in the last few years it still relies on each individual poster to be printed and posted. Digital allows for copy to reach thousands of screens from one remote server and similarly they can be taken down just as fast.”

The breadth of the market

With Sign and Digital UK, Ipex and FESPA around the corner and the Visual Communications shows later in the year, we should expect to see a number of new kit propositions to choose from. However, according to Rigamonti, the recession has held back any significant transformation. “In my opinion, manufacturers have been slowed in terms of innovations by their survival instincts and this is unlikely to change until the storm has past,” he says. “When that time comes, we would like to see the combination of speed and quality become more balanced. In flat-bed printing, for example, the quality of our machines is superb but there is room for improvement in terms of speed.”